

Diversifying the Curriculum: History of Philosophy Module

Blog by Frederique Janssen-Lauret

We redesigned the curriculum for the first-year, 80-student module 'History of Philosophy' to include Indian, Buddhist, Chinese and African philosophy, so that our department could teach a history of philosophy that represents the breadth of the discipline.

Heterodox traditions of philosophy have long been left out of standard survey courses in the English-speaking world. This has a looping effect where their exclusion further cements a limited canon of philosophical literature. Undergraduate students in our department have explicitly requested, in a consultation, the addition of more non-Western philosophy to the curriculum. First-year History of Philosophy has in the past been either 100% focused on Western philosophy or featured only Western and Islamic philosophy. The Diversity in the Curriculum funds paid for Dr Ajinkya Deshmukh, who has a background in Indian and Buddhist philosophy, to undertake research to feature in the lectures, tutorials, and assessment and to develop innovative new teaching materials. We also had a guest lecture from Prof Michael Beaney (Aberdeen), on the Zhuangzhi and Chinese philosophy.

Our History of Philosophy curriculum previously began with Greek philosophy, but due to the diversification funds we began with ancient (orthodox/Hindu) Indian philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, and Chinese philosophy. We interspersed early and late Buddhist, early Indian, seventeenth-century Indian, medieval Arabic, and African philosophy with some of the Western classics as well as some neglected Western female figures: Plato/Aristotle, Descartes/Elisabeth of Bohemia, and Spinoza/Cavendish.

Finding texts and translations that are suitable to the first-year undergraduate level, including students who are not taking single honours in philosophy, without compromising on academic rigour, involved going over dozens of articles and chapters to find a set that does justice to the development of philosophy around the world while still being approachable for potential first-generation learners and for those who may lack prior philosophical knowledge.

Assessment: An innovative feature of the assessment was a short assessed weekly exercise of identifying the premises and conclusions of a specific argument lifted out of a classic text. This argument then forms the backbone of the tutorial discussions. The assessed exercise is designed so that some crucial text is engaged with every week but as the arguments will be short (1-2 pages, sometimes part of a page) the reading demands of the tutorials will remain manageable for first-year students.

There were also two essays, one on the first half of the curriculum and one on the second. We formulated exercise and essay questions which challenge students and

reward legitimate engagement with the entirety of the module instead of piecemeal engagement with individual lectures and readings.

Students of this course acquire a more holistic understanding of the history of philosophy, perhaps better than those who study the subject primarily through the lens of Western philosophy. This will place the students in good stead to engage with the subject more broadly than they otherwise would have been able to. Given the University's diverse student body, those who study this module will be better placed to pursue academic interests in philosophical traditions from more parts of the world.

Students who have a solid first-year grounding in world philosophical traditions will find this very helpful if they want to explore non-Western philosophical traditions in higher-level modules or dissertations. We hope that in the longer term, a more diversified and decolonised curriculum will attract a more diverse student body in philosophy.

Students commented positively on these changes in their questionnaires, including the following,

The wide range of topics covered, especially the inclusion of many non western perspectives.

The content of the course was good – very well rounded and covered a broad range of subject matter.

Everything, I can't fault it. It was really interesting in lectures, readings, and tutorial discussions.

We have obtained further funding for taking these heterodox traditions outside the University. Dr Deshmukh has already taught two preliminary sessions on Buddhist philosophy at the Manchester Grammar School.